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# **Non-prescribed spaces, creativity and narrative formation: a systems-based examination of a community art group exploring food poverty**

Dr. Bella Wheeler

School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, Brighton UK; Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project (BUCFP), Brighton, UK.

## **ABSTRACT**

This article describes a year-long participatory arts project carried out as part of a community–university partnership in the South of England. The research sought to examine the relationship between the ‘user-led’ ethos of the Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project (BUCFP) and emergence within it of creatively working and self-managing groups, examining how an environment that did not adhere to a prescribed use of space might enable groups to make sense of their experiences. The research used ethnographic methods and a theoretical framework informed by systems theory, critical health psychology and narrative analysis to explore the group’s experiences of food poverty. The research demonstrates ways in which the group provided community members with a space in which to examine, define and make legitimate their experiences and how this can be thought of as an educational and community knowledge-building practice that has important implications, particularly for notions of well-being.

## **KEYWORDS**

Arts-based methods; participatory methods; food poverty; stigmatisation; narrative research; practitioner research

## **Introduction**

Habermas and McCarthy (1985) have argued that in contemporary society, life has become increasingly structurally differentiated, progressively prescribed and that actions and behaviours have become steadily directed towards specific means and ends, invariably economically determined. For individuals and groups that do not conform to, enact and maintain the neo-liberal narrative, i.e. ‘the meta-language that instructs people how to live as people’ (Bauman 2012, 54), and who fall outside that narrative, social isolation and marginalisation loom. The unemployed, benefits claimants and those experiencing poverty might be considered among those who do not fit such normative discourses. The narrative of economic inactivity as failed citizenship is perpetuated throughout UK governmental policy discourse (Lansley and Mack 2015) and supported by sections of the popular media in the image of the ‘shirker’ and ‘scrounger’ (O’Hara 2015, 98), abjectified and marginalised as ‘other’ (Tyler 2013). Describing this scapegoating, Bauman (2012, 194) states:

The candidates must be outside, but not too far; similar to ‘us rightful community members’ yet unmistakably different. The act of sacrificing these objects is meant, after all, to draw tight unsurpassable boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the community.

Tyler (2013, 28) suggests that such abjection becomes part of 'the ongoing processes of bordering that make and unmake both the psychological and material boundaries of the subject'. This raises the question of how those unwilling or unable to enact the normative ideal might resist such stigmatisations and 'make sense' of their experiences in ways that create, as Butler suggests, 'liveable lives' (2004, 17). Where, we might ask, are the spaces that enable the development of ways of thinking and being that resist castigation? A growing number of voices suggest that spaces in which people are able to self-manage free from disciplinary practices may have a close relationship with well-being (Gagnye 2014; Marmot 2004; Walker, Hanna, and Hart 2015). Describing the Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project (BUCFP), where my research was conducted, Walker (2012, 13) suggests that it provides:

...a set of potential options that allow the different Centre users to find their own route to self-sufficiency...the hands-off approach, that is, providing a space where people are not pushed into behaving in certain ways or doing certain activities, is key to the popularity of the Centre.

For an increasingly restricted and managed self, spaces in which to make sense of one's life in ways that offer an alternative to dominant conceptions seem few and far between. As Sennett (2006, 188) argues 'In the new institutions, people can frequently succumb to feeling they have no narrative agency; that is, that they lack the power to interpret what is happening to them'. The ability to tell stories and develop narrative coherence about one's life is essential to what it means to be human; as Holstein and Gubrium (2000, 03) state 'not only is there a story of the self, but it's been said that the self, itself, is narratively constructed'. To take seriously the notion that selves are created by the coherence of the stories we tell about ourselves (Andrews 2014) suggests that as social beings, we are dependent on the sharing of our stories. Phoenix (2013, 72) argues that the contextual turn in narrative analysis as 'the second wave that has moved from the study of narrative as text (first wave) to the study of narrative-in-context' is an attempt to address questions of the situatedness of narrative building; the sociality of which is highlighted by Rice (2002, 80) 'The story of an individual life – and the coherence of individual identity – depends, for its very intelligibility, on the stories of collective identity that constitute a culture...cultures and societies organize individual identity'.

In this article, I suggest that, in a landscape wherein community spaces are becoming increasingly structured in response to externally determined top-down agendas (Aiken 2014; Burawoy 2005; Cairns, Aiken, and Hutchison 2010; and Macmillan 2010), spaces that are free from such rationalisation are important to consider in their ability to enable group and community gathering and the co-construction of alternative 'sense-making' narratives. The article begins with reflection upon the methodological approaches taken in order to address questions of group narrative formation. Following this, fieldwork data describe the way in which a back and forth movement between art-making and group discussion contributed to the emergence of the group space and narratives surrounding food poverty. The article discusses how the group's growing awareness of an audience for their artwork, and the sense of a need to 'speak' on the topic of food poverty, prompted the development of a particular visual narrative and the taking of a position in a wider sociocultural and political landscape. The article concludes with a discussion of how the group's ability to determine their own representation through visual methods can be thought of as aiding a process of resisting stigmatisation surrounding food poverty.

## **A participatory approach: the devising of a method**

Established as a worker cooperative in 1986, the BUCFP became a registered charity in 1994. It operates an open door and drop-in policy and user-led ethos, serving a diverse community in the city of Brighton and Hove. Many of the Centre's users are unemployed and share the experience of hardship and poverty. A significant proportion of the Centre users self-report as affected by mental health issues. A variety of services are available at the Centre including a registered crèche, welfare rights and housing advice, IT and language classes, art-making, cooking and opportunities to volunteer to deliver these services. Through my volunteering in the art groups, I became interested in how the BUCFP's user-led ethos appeared to enable the emergence of self-managing and creatively working groups and what the relationships were between the user-led ethos, the forming of the groups and sense-making and well-being. I proposed addressing these questions through my academic work and developed a community–university research project with the BUCFP that used participatory and arts-based methods, participant observation and photography and group interviews in a year-long fieldwork with a group of Centre users. As well as documenting a BUCFP group using arts-based and participatory methods, I was also interested in addressing the situatedness of the group in order to examine questions of the BUCFP's ethos and self-determination and this posed a particular methodological challenge. Building on previous art projects that I had been involved with, staff members were keen to explore the topic of food poverty as an increasing number of Centre users were using the Centre to access the low-cost daily hot vegan meal and free food parcels. As I will discuss, the setting of a centralising theme and introduction of a methodological approach had various implications for the research. I proposed that we adopt a participatory framework (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005; Noffke and Somekh 2011) and a movement between cycles of immersion in the topic of food poverty in the form of weekly two-hour art-making sessions which I would document using participant observation and photography, interspersed with monthly two-hour reflexive group meetings which I would audio record.

In combining arts-based practice and participatory methods, I was interested in exploring the commonalities between the two approaches. Participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001) suggests a movement between 'action' as the gathering of information relevant to the topic and 'research' as the reflection upon it that aids the development of ideas surrounding the topic under scrutiny. The notion of a similarity between arts-based practices and participatory approaches developed through my interest in Boden's (2004) and Ehrenzweig's (1967) descriptions of artistic endeavour as a movement between unconscious primary and conscious secondary processes. Suggesting the artistic process also as a form of information gathering, Ehrenzweig (1967, 04) states 'In the solution of complex tasks the undifferentiation of unconscious vision turns into an instrument of rigorous precision and leads to results that are fully acceptable to conscious reality'. In my methodological approach, the artistic 'wider sweep of low-level, undifferentiated vision that serves as a precision instrument for scanning far-flung structures offering a greater number of choices' (Ehrenzweig 1967, 32), when brought into a participatory action research framework, would aid the emergence of alternative narratives surrounding the topic of food poverty. Movements between immersion and reflection are highlighted by Boden (2004, 30) when she suggests 'Unconscious work is possible, and of a certainty it is only fruitful, if it is on the one hand preceded and on the other hand followed by, a period of conscious work'. My methodological approach was thus responsive to ways in which groups ordinarily worked at the BUCFP and brought together the creativity of art-making and the praxis of participatory approaches.

Using an ethnographic methodology through which to gather my data in the form of participant observation and note taking and photography and group interviews, I aimed to examine sense-making and narrative formation as it developed in relation to the environment, creativity and group self-management. While I had proposed exploring ways in which the BUCFP's user-led ethos enabled (or did not) the forming and functioning of self-managing and creatively working groups, asking what the effects of participation might be for group narrative formation, my position as a practitioner–researcher, the methodological scaffold and the purposefulness attached to the project, despite the claim to be responsive to the BUCFP environment, nevertheless introduced a difference that was important to consider. Arguably, a more 'traditionally' ethnographic approach –wherein I observed the BUCFP environment but attempted to have minimum impact upon it – might have better addressed questions of the relationship between the organisational ethos and the emergence of self-managing groups. However, as acknowledged in much of the research literature, the possibility of carrying out research without in some way affecting it remains an area of contestation (St. Pierre and Lather 2013), and systems theorists such as Luhmann (2013), Maturana and Varela (1980) and Ulanowicz (1997) raise the question of the role of the observer and the effect on that which is observed. Given my position as an experienced volunteer, and as such embedded within the BUCFP environment, it would have been impossible and arguably ethically inappropriate to have attempted to be an objective observer. My response to this issue was to be as explicit as possible regarding my positionality and methodological stance and to acknowledge, by taking a reflexive approach, ways in which I might be shaping the group's practice. That methodological and substantive questions were inextricably interwoven blurred the boundaries between community art practice, arts-based and participatory methods and ethnographic and qualitative approaches, and demanded a greater consideration of the complexities of carrying out community-based research, particularly as a practitioner–researcher.

### **Populating the structure: what we did**

Recruitment began in May 2014 through a combination of encouragement from BUCFP staff and the distribution of leaflets and posters inviting Centre users who identified as affected by food poverty to take part. Eleven Centre users came to the initial meeting and having discussed confidentiality, ethics and what the research was about, we began to talk about food poverty and ideas for the artwork. Steve, an unemployed man in his twenties who described the difficulty of managing a healthy diet while on benefits and living in a bedsit without adequate cooking facilities or storage space and who as a consequence had developed Type 2 diabetes, made a suggestion which set our focus. He proposed that we make oversized foodstuffs in the style of a still life banquet. Invoking a combinational form of creativity (Boden 2010), Steve proposed that we cover the food pieces in glitter, jewels and 'bling' bringing associations of the rustic and bucolic together with themes of expense and excess. Developing the idea further, other participants suggested that the pieces could be painted neon to symbolise the artificiality of contemporary food. The juxtaposition would form a visual narrative that suggested a landscape populated with food that was both 'fake' and expensive and began a conceptualisation of food poverty not as a problem located with the participants themselves but instead as located with food manufacturers and as such began to resist stigmatisation surrounding food poverty.

I drew a diagram of the research cycles and the proposed movement between 'action' and 'reflection'. While some participants were keen to begin 'action' in the form of art-making using chicken wire, mod roc and paper mache, Pat, a woman in her sixties who lived in a van and used the BUCFP regularly, suggested that we ought to first discuss food poverty in greater depth. Finding agreement among other participants, Pat's suggestion struck me as an important moment. The allocation and claiming of time and psychical space acted as a form of territorialisation (DeLanda 1997) that enabled the group to become autopoietic (Teubner 1993). The emerging group was recognised as an entity that needed to be able to communicate with itself in order to develop and grow. Sandra, a retired childcare worker in her sixties, suggested that we create a mind map in order to deepen our understanding, and other participants agreed. At the end of the activity, the group had produced a large piece of paper with a broad range of comments relating to food poverty (Figure 1). Pat, Sandra and Mel, a single parent in her twenties studying for a degree in health and nutrition, asked me to organise the comments thematically and bring them to the next session. Issues ranged from concerns to do with the micro and everyday such as living in bedsits with small kitchens, managing family mealtimes, lack of affordable, fresh and healthy food, to wider issues to do with employment, the government's austerity agenda and zero hour contracts, to mass food production, animal welfare, genetic modification and concerns about loss of relationships with nature. The mind map revealed a diverse array of issues and narrative affordances through which ideas surrounding food poverty might develop.

Within a narrative that suggested that food poverty was the result of a corrupt food system wherein mass production resulted in a proliferation of cheap and low nutritional value food, the solution proposed by some participants was a form of self-education. In this scenario, individuals were able to outsmart 'fake' food producers if they were willing to devote the time and energy to learn how. This narrative included a moral dimension, particularly for those keen to maintain a foothold however precarious, in the existing system. For these participants, social change could be achieved through forms of 'conscious consumerism' (Stewart 2012) which meant adapting one's behaviour and buying Fair Trade, local and organic food, for example. However, that the ethical consumer was reliant on economic ability in order to enact this form of political agency raised pertinent questions which were reflected in comments from participants who stated that they 'could not afford to have a conscience'. The emergence of a counter-narrative (Bamberg and Andrews 2004) within the group disrupted the conscious consumer narrative and revealed it as inadequate when wider, systemic issues were brought into consideration.



**Figure 1.** Group mind map on the topic of food poverty.

The counter-narrative suggested that social change was possible instead through local, political and grassroots forms of community organisation such as food co-ops and shared allotments and exposed differences between those who wished to create an alternative to what was viewed as a corrupt capitalistic order and those for whom maintaining a purchase— a form of inclusion – in the existing order was the more desirable option, offering a compromise between capitalism and ethics. Within the group emerged therefore diverging narratives surrounding food poverty, raising the question of how these would be dealt with through the artwork.

## Into the visual

Luhmann (2013, 73) suggests that 'A system can operate only with structures that it has built itself'. In generating myriad narrative affordances and an art mode to work to, participants had begun to create the structures that they would operate with. Having generated narrative complexity, participants then had to enter into a process of a reduction of the complexity and an attempt to resolve tensions between contradictory narratives of the politics of resistance and of ethical consumerism. In order to manage a need for multiplicity while also striving towards a sense of cohesion – something that Ulanowicz (1997) suggests that all systems seek – the group had to enter a process of selection. This was driven in many ways by the purposefulness of producing an art exhibition on the topic of food poverty and the need to be comprehensible to an 'imagined audience' (Cooley 1902 [2009]; Elkind and Bowen 1979; Litt 2012).

The suggestion by Paula, a newly qualified art teacher in her thirties on maternity leave, that the group move to visual mind-mapping as a continuation of the mapping exercise prompted the question of whether this was an attempt to increase or decrease narrative complexity. Paula and Pat decided to work together on their visual map, while Mel and Simon, a retired man in his sixties with Alzheimer's disease, Jon, an unemployed man in his twenties, and James, in his thirties and also unemployed, worked together on theirs. Paula and Pat organised their collage into four sections guided by the mind-map themes (Figure 2). One section was labelled 'tradition' and included pictures of cakes, tea, bunting and beans; another was labelled 'nature' and included pictures of farmers and trees; while another addressed 'body image' and included pictures of scantily clad women, pies and tape measures. The top right-hand corner seemed less structured and included pictures of dogs, dog bowls and the words 'I'm okay, I'm alive'. This corner seemed to be in contrast to the other more descriptive corners and I assumed it was Jon's contribution as he had been moving between the two groups. In the middle of the sections was a somewhat suggestive picture of a woman with blonde curly hair licking her lips and the words 'decisions decisions' glued on in alphabet cereal.





**Figure 2.** Paula and Pat's visual mind map.

Apart from the dog's dinner section, the piece felt literal and as if it consciously told us something about the themes. While it spoke to the challenges of making food choices, it struck me that its coherence perhaps limited the scope for interpretation. The piece remained instead resolutely first-order and resisted the necessity, if we are to agree with Eco (1989) for example, that the audience engages in processes of interpretation. In a reversal of Barthesian (1977) ideas, meaning instead lay with the makers of the collage and there was little scope for the viewer to partake in meaning making. In contrast, Mel, Simon, Jon and James' collage (Figure 3) felt less tied to the themes and as if it demanded that the audience do some interpretative work. Meaning was elusive, increasing rather than decreasing narrative complexity and raising questions of author, audience and interpretation and art as generative in its ambiguity. Why, we might ask, did Mel's group's piece include pictures of a camera, an exotic looking bird, a boat, a naked woman and a robot? What were the makers trying to tell us, if anything, about food poverty?

Tensions between greater complexities on the one hand versus the need to formalise a narrative on the other – and this as driven by a desire to communicate something coherent to an imagined audience – highlighted further differences within the group. It is possible to suggest that the proposed sculpted still life needed to provide enough scope for the inclusion of further narrative content, and that this was in the process of being worked upon by the group. The group's relationship with the imagined audience was recognised as important in that the artwork signified taking a position in a sociocultural and political field. What the artwork 'said', and how participants imagined the message to be perceived, was important for the participants in terms of what this in turn said about the group. As Cooley's (1902 [2009], 152) explorations of the dynamics between self-concept and audience in the



The interplay between the human and the nonhuman in a field of distributed effectuality and of inbuilt material-discursive dynamics are concepts that influence deeply the ideas of narrativity and text. If matter is agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings, every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is 'telling', and therefore can be the object of a critical analysis aimed at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a 'choreography of becoming'.

The process of reflection on the art pieces as both material and meaning-bearing objects seemed to have taken the group out of its immediate moment, forming a type of second-order observation and enabling a consideration of the transcendent qualities of the artwork in the communicative (group) sphere. While previously the art-making had provided a sense of purpose, in this reflexive moment it enabled a form of self-observation, an important feature of systems working. Teubner's (1993, 24) suggestion that 'self-descriptions facilitate the interlinking of individual operations by determining that they belong to the system, and thus serve to regulate self-reproduction' raises the question of what aspects of the artworks participants might apply to themselves as part of narrative co-construction and processes of 'self-reproduction'. Referring to the image of a smiling woman in traditional South American dress, Clive, an unemployed engineer in his fifties, commented:

People abroad in other countries experiencing food poverty still look happy though don't they...and have a smile on their face?

[Group interview, 5 August 2014]

Clive's narrative construction of a rural poor, content and thus not needing social or political action, perhaps signalled a process of distancing (Schafer 2010). This construction was intercepted however when Ellie, a BUCFP staff member, stated:

But do you think it [food poverty] is here in Brighton?

[Group interview, 5 August 2014]

Ellie's redirection of the narrative towards a different agenda, one determined perhaps by her interests as a member of staff invested in the research and topic, demonstrated how the artwork images and their associated meanings were utilised by different group members for different purposes in the building of narrative. The artwork appeared to play multiple functions both in the creation of a communicative space and in the reflection that enabled group members to determine applicability, narrative formation and continuation. It was noticeable that the less descriptive visual mind map appeared to offer greater interpretative affordances and as such a wider scope for the development of narrative constructs.

### **Complexity versus clarity of message**

The multiplicity of themes generated through the mind-mapping and visual-mapping processes came to occupy an interesting place in relation to the group's developing sense of a need to create a unified visual narrative in the artwork and exhibition. There emerged a tension between an idea of art pieces as enabling participants to speak about their experiences of food poverty in their own diverse ways versus the need to develop a singular clear message encapsulated in the sculpture and overarching theme of 'artificiality and expense'. Discussing these tensions, the introduction by Paula of the concepts of 'curation' and 'composition' proved a significant moment:

Paula: It's about how it's curated, about how it's put together

Fran: Mmm yes I agree with you

Paula: It's all about composition

Fran: Yeah

[Group interview, 7 April 2015]

Reinforced by Paula's professional knowledge and status as an art teacher and supported by Fran, a retired design technology teacher in her sixties, this language seemed to shift the group's thinking from being about individual pieces as the sole bearers of messages to a consideration of how the pieces would be read as a whole. That the pieces could not, in actuality, exist independently and that how they would be read would inevitably be determined by other pieces around them highlighted concepts of context, meaning, signification and collaboration.

Paula: And pulling it together is really important and the most important, it is important, what you're saying

Fran: Yeah of course

Paula: You know it's got to have, at the end of the day I mean you sort of, maybe you, you, although it's everybody's, everybody's gotta have their input because it's a group work it still needs curating, like it still needs sort of unifying theme you know to be all pulled together if you see what I mean?

[Group interview 7 April 2015]

While participants had developed a unifying visual narrative of 'artificiality and expense', it was now necessary that they find a language which enabled the delivery this narrative, a meta-language to address the question of how to convey the meaning of the artwork. The language of curation and composition provided this. In earlier sessions my attempts to use 'the language of art' through suggestions that we were creating a 'visual dialogue' had been met with snorts of derision and described as sounding 'too poncey' [Group interview, 10 March 2015], though participants had nonetheless used visual metaphor in beginning the project. Steve's suggestion of the combining of 'bling' with the still life had been developed and played on ideas of the rural idyll, authenticity,

modernity and corruption. When Mel suggested that we attach a ball and chain to the sculpted 'chicken' to symbolise the cruelty of factory farming [Group interview, 7 April 2015], she too engaged with ideas of visual metaphor without needing a language to explain that this was what she was doing. This intuiting had got us so far, but questions of audience interpretation and a concern that the message might not be conveyed (some Centre users asking if we were creating a harvest festival) meant that the discovery of the 'art language' enabled progression when the delivery of a message demanded it. Addressing an imagined audience through the medium of the visual arts within a contextual theme of 'food poverty' had created an expectation that 'something be said'. The exhibition was not only a display of people's work and artistic talents but also a forum through which the group 'spoke' and did so as a group, as such attention given to 'the message' became of critical importance. The development of the 'art language' was arguably provoked by these circumstances in order that the group, as a system, achieve its goals. This raises interesting Batesonian (1979) questions of communication and meta-communication and the way that a language 'code' is called forth. As Bateson suggests when he makes the differentiation between 'action in context and action or behaviour which defines context or makes context intelligible...a function of the meta-message is in fact to classify the messages which occur within its context' (1979,129). The language of curation and composition provided the meta-language that the group needed in order to deliver the message. The discovery of this language also signalled the importance that group members attached to their comprehensibility. As the meta-language emerged, it became clear that certain criteria for inclusion in the group had developed. No longer was inclusion dependent upon a shared experience of food poverty but was also dependent upon the willingness to adopt the mode of the group, prompting systems theory considerations of operational and organisational closure. As Mingers (2004, 404) suggests: 'Autopoietic systems are organizationally closed – they are characterised by relations of self-production – but structurally (or interactively) open in that they do still have interactions with their environment'. In order that the group maintain its 'operations' in producing the artwork and being comprehensible, conformity to its mode was required. This was made apparent when newcomers to the group who brought with them ideas that deviated from the agreed mode found that their suggestions were quietly, but nonetheless clearly, side-lined.

### **Taking a position in the field**

As discussed previously, the ambiguity and lack of narrative coherence in Mel's group's visual mind map had provided a complex array of affordances through which group members had been able to think about and discuss food poverty in greater depth. Why, in now thinking about the delivery of a visual message to an imagined audience, were participants so concerned with shaping a coherent narrative and 'saying something', given that the interpretative affordances of the earlier artwork had been recognised as valuable? An answer may lie in a closer analysis of assumptions surrounding the role of participatory, political and protest art. Did an expectation that the group 'speak' assuredly and authoritatively on the topic of food poverty, and the consequent concern with a diligent crafting of a message, potentially foreclose ambiguity and the audience's ability to share and generate meaning making through processes of interpretation? Did this also perhaps mean that some of the nuance of participants' stories was forfeited for the sake of a 'grand narrative' in relation to food poverty? The over-determination of 'the message' in participatory art might be symptomatic of the social turn in participatory art in which meaning is expected and prescribed. Discussing these debates, Bishop (2012, 13) suggests: 'Participatory art is perceived to channel art's symbolic capital towards constructive

social change...there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond'. Tasked with 'repairing the social bond', the aim of participatory art is arguably two-fold; firstly to include marginalised groups and communities in social discourse and contribute to 'constructive social change' and secondly for group members to speak clearly and authoritatively on the social issues that affect them. To be ambiguous therefore is to risk incomprehensibility and fail to be included, raising pertinent questions regarding art's purpose.

A tension between narratives that suggested lack of individual responsibility as the root of food poverty (Lansley and Mack 2015) versus narratives suggesting systemic and structural inequality, had been apparent within the group at various points:

Lorraine: A select minority live the life of Riley while the majority live in poverty don't they?

Bella: Yeah, yeah

Paula: But then there's a lot of people that, it's not necessarily starving, it's people that are sort of maybe uneducated and eating the wrong things

[Group interview, 13 January 2015]

There had been contestations between those who felt that food poverty was a result of people making poor choices, 'being lazy' and 'just wanting to do the easy thing' [Paula, Group interview, 13 January 2015] and those who suggested that it was not the fault of individuals 'that they can't afford to buy better quality food' [Lorraine, Group interview, 13 January 2015]. With the arrival of members such as Fran, who brought a clear account of food poverty that highlighted the impact of zero hour contracts, lack of a living wage and punitive benefit cuts, the narrative of individual deficit had been quietly side-lined.

As a more assuredly anti-austerity narrative developed so too began the development of an allegiance with a more established Left-leaning position. The evolution of this narrative, and its emergence in the artwork, returns us to questions of counter-narrative formation. As Bamberg and Andrews (2004, 01) suggest: 'Counter-narratives are the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives'. As the more concrete counter-narrative emerged and found expression in the artwork, participants began describing themselves as art activists and adopted a familiar visual trope that audiences would recognise as subversive in the form of the 'culture jamming' and 'Adbusters' styles (English 2004; Milstein and Pulo 2015) (Figures 4 and 5). However, as participant Leon, a long time Centre user in his forties, suggested when presented with the Adbusters style leaflet promoting the art exhibition:

I think that's been done before, it's been done before, I seen things like that before though

[Group interview, 10 February 2015]

The adoption of an existing artistic approach can perhaps be thought of as a response to the emergence of a more familiar and available narrative. This 'shortcutting' in the delivery of a visual message arguably indicated the group's desire to ally itself with an existing sociocultural and political position. In articulating and delivering this visual narrative, it appeared that a feedback loop had emerged between the group and its imagined audience, providing a recursivity that served to

strengthen the group's narrative formation, position and identity. This raises questions of the availability of narratives, their adoption, signification and recursivity between artists and audiences through dialogic, material and semiotic processes.



**Figure 4.** Culture jamming.



**Figure 5.** Final exhibition piece displayed at the Jubilee Library, Brighton as part of the Brighton Festival 2015.

## Conclusion

In this article I have selected data which illuminate the methodology, and particularly in relation to what it affords for understanding the emergence of counter-narratives in the context of the self-managing group. I have described my ethnographic reflections of working with the group using arts-based and participatory methods to explore food poverty. My initial proposition that I explore how the BUCFP's user-led ethos related to the forming of a self-managing and creatively working group shifted, by necessity. The research revealed that it was the provision of a task addressing a specific topic, introduction of a methodological framework and my role as a practitioner–researcher alongside the group's ability to work unimpeded that in many ways shaped the group's functioning. This finding gave rise to a more concerted methodological exploration. Systems theorists (e.g. Flood 2010; Ison 2007; Juarrero 2002; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Schon and Argyris 1995; Senge 1990) whose work underpins much participatory research methodology, suggest that opportunities for reflexivity – second-order observation – are enabled by participatory methodologies and the patterning of movements between immersion and reflection. Self-observation enables self-awareness and this in turn enables self-determination. In the context of my study, art-making introduced as part of the participatory framework aided group self-awareness largely in two ways. Firstly, and in earlier developmental stages, art-making created an ambiguity which offered myriad potential narrative affordances, as demonstrated in the example of Clive's narrative formation regarding the South American woman and ways in which this was redirected by Ellie; group member's interpretations of



the images aided self-descriptions. Secondly, the directedness of a topic – food poverty – and the shaping of a collective visual statement in relation to this were developed in relation to perceived audience and meant establishing and symbolising a position using visual approaches as part of a wider sociocultural and political field. It is possible to consider that in allying themselves with an existing visual narrative – the culture jamming and Adbusters tropes – group members developed an ability to resist stigma through creating a symbolic allegiance. Art-making was thus useful both in its generative ambiguity and in its enabling the delivery of a formalised message that resisted stigmatisation within a wider cultural landscape. Andrews (1991, 32) states: ‘If one comes to adopt a politicised world view, accurately locating one’s position in the social structure, no matter how low that position might be, can itself be an act of empowerment’. Through art-making, group members were able to identify with and symbolise a position using visual methods.

If we consider empowerment as an ability also to determine one’s own representation in the social structure, it becomes possible to examine how participatory and arts-based approaches contribute to repositioning and the ability to resist stigma. Joining an existing visual and counter-narrative in a public display also aided in ‘bringing into representation’ (Squire 2005, 97) experiences and narratives which otherwise remain ‘outside representation’. This creates a consideration of the ways in which group art practices and participatory methodologies create an ability to challenge stigmatising discourses and contributes to current debates surrounding the ability to resist stigma and its relation to well-being (WHO 2013). The participatory, arts-based and ethnographic approaches used in my research illuminated how sense-making and narrative formation develops in relation to environment, practice and wider socio-political, cultural and semiotic landscapes. It is perhaps useful to consider Rose’s (2014, 31) critique of arts-based methods as appearing in something of a vacuum, when she states: ‘There is an almost total neglect in the literature using visual research methods of research participants’ “symbolic and communicative” competencies in their culture’. Sitting at the intersections of art-making as an individual practice, group practice, public display and methodological approach, my research highlighted ways in which meaning is generated in relation to complex systemic, cultural and contextual factors. If arts-based and participatory approaches are to be of use to research in their ability to illuminate participant subjectivity and meaning making, then just as narrative research moved from first wave to second wave and a greater consideration of the importance of situatedness and context (Phoenix 2013, 72) so too arts-based, participatory and visual methods must develop ways of understanding, documenting and analysing the environmental, socio-political, cultural and semiotic contexts in which they occur.

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### **ORCID**

Bella Wheeler <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8721-5669>

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